



## **Superior Court of California County of Riverside**

4050 Main Street, Riverside, CA 92501

### **MEDIA ADVISORY**

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(Electronic version available at:

<http://riverside.courts.ca.gov/media/media.shtml>

### **RIVERSIDE COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT ANNOUNCES NEW VETERANS COURT**

**RIVERSIDE COUNTY:** The Riverside County Superior Court is pleased to announce that a new Veterans Court will commence operation on January 5, 2012. The calendar, to be presided over by Judge Mark Johnson, will be held weekly on Thursday afternoons in Department 31 at the Hall of Justice in downtown Riverside.

The Veterans Court is designed to supervise felony and misdemeanor veterans through a comprehensive judicially monitored program of treatment and rehabilitation services. The court is authorized under Penal Code section 1170.9, which requires a nexus between the issues that have caused the veteran to intersect with the criminal justice system and their military service.

The Veterans Court is a collaborative effort between the court and agencies such as the Riverside County District Attorney, Public Defender, Probation, Mental Health and the Veterans Administration Healthcare Systems. Participants in the program will be required to plead guilty or agree to reinstatement of probation. Participants must also be placed on formal probation. The Veterans Court judge will make the final determination that a participant committed the offense(s) at issue as a result of sexual trauma, traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse or mental health problems stemming from service in the United States military. Regular court appearances will be required. Participants must agree to a minimum 18-month intensive treatment program, or a 12-month program for individuals convicted of specified misdemeanors.

Treatment services provided to those who participate would include weekly individual and group counseling, drug and alcohol testing, mental health treatment and regular attendance at support and self-help meetings. Ongoing aftercare services will be available to all participants who graduate.

Judge Johnson, himself a decorated combat veteran, commented, "The court is dedicated to this important program. There are 23.5 million veterans in this country,

including 1.7 million veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Statistics show that 19 percent of veterans suffer from PTSD or major depression and in 2006 1.8 million veterans suffered from some form of substance abuse.” He added that the goals of the Veterans Court are to reduce participants’ contacts with the criminal justice system, reduce costs associated with criminal case processing and re-arrest, and improve the quality of life of the veterans, helping them to become stable, employed and substance free.

Presiding Judge Sherrill A. Ellsworth echoed Judge Johnson’s comments. “Courts continue to face fiscal challenges; however, I am very proud of the commitment that all of the participating agencies have put forth to ensure that the Veterans Court is successful. This is something that is clearly needed for those members of this community who have sacrificed to protect this country. I cannot think of a more qualified judge to lead this endeavor than Judge Johnson.”

In addition to serving as a Riverside Superior Court judge, Judge Johnson is a Colonel in the Army Reserves. He is a combat veteran, having served in 2004 with the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division in Baghdad, Iraq. He is the recipient of the Bronze Star Medal, three awards of the Meritorious Service Medal, the Combat Action Badge and numerous other awards and decorations. He has served as a Battalion Commander, Company Commander, and Staff Judge Advocate. He is also a graduate of the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

A detailed information sheet regarding the Riverside County Veterans Court can be located on the courts website at <http://riverside.courts.ca.gov/> by selecting ‘criminal’ under the ‘divisions’ tab.

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